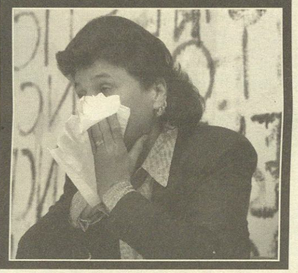
WHY I KILLED MY HUSBAND

What could drive a woman to turn her partner into a human fireball? Kiranjit Ahluwalia tells us why she had no choice...



'AS A CHILD growing up in a big, happy family in a small village in India, England seemed like another world. When my elder sisters started to get married abroad in places like England and Canada, neither the idea of moving away or getting married appealed to me.

I suppose being the youngest of nine children, I was used to my family letting me have my own way, so I believed that there was a chance I could fulfill my dream of studying and becoming a lawyer in Ahmedabad. But by 21 I realised I couldn't run away from marriage. I remember the first time I had to meet a suitable boy, coming out of the kitchen with a tray of sweets and my head covered – it just wasn't me.

I pleaded with my brothers, but I knew this time around I wasn't going to get what I wanted. I want to have a career, I begged them. They couldn't understand.

Handsome

Since my father passed away, my brothers had done all they could to ensure we never went without, so they could not comprehend why their sister should have to go out working to make money instead of being looked after by a nice man. So it was settled. I was to marry.

My favourite sister had married earlier and was living in Canada and I thought it was the most beautiful country in the world, so I asked to be married there. After a long search, the right man was found. He had the right surname, right upbringing and fitted the specific request I gave to my brothers – he must be handsome and have a good sense of humour. Deepak had it all.

By the time I realised he was based in England and not Canada, it didn't matter. Here was a most charming young man, very good looking, funny and getting on famously with my family – we just clicked.

Happy

When the topic of marriage was raised I told him I would marry him on two conditions – that he would let me work and he wouldn't make me wear saris. Stupid things saris, I could never make head nor tail of wrapping an endless bit of cloth round and round! He said that would be fine and it was settled.

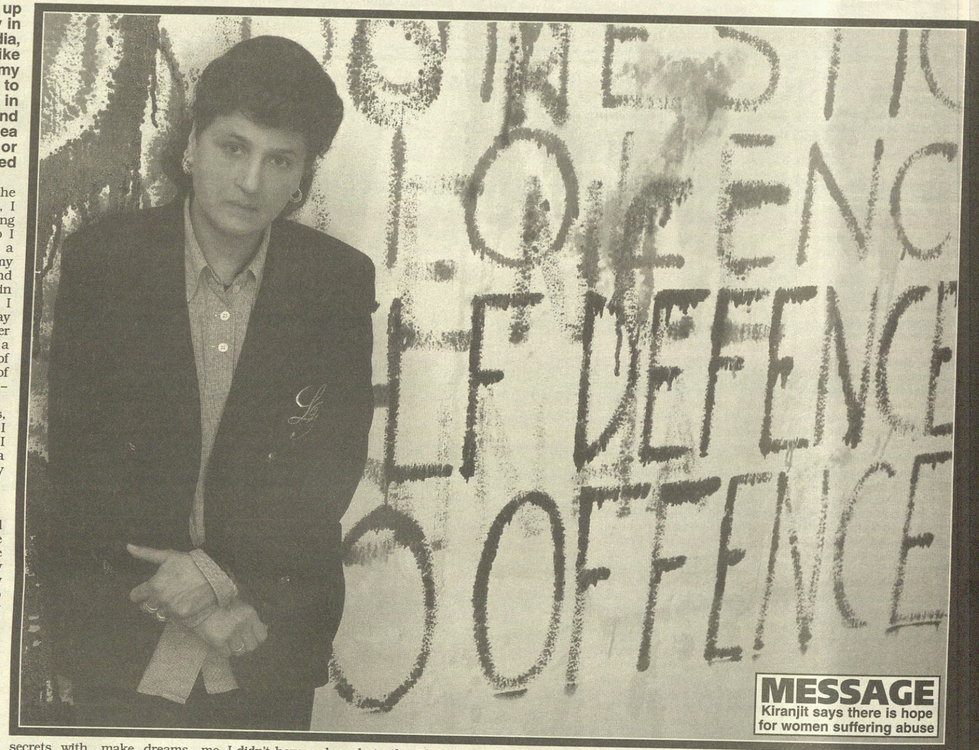
We got married in a registry office in Toronto and for the next five months, as I waited for my papers to be processed, I sat in Canada dreaming about the day we would be united. The idea of him I was left with was a man I could joke with, share secrets with, make dreams with.

I had butterflies in my stomach all the way to Gatwick. I'd been to visit England before and to be honest, I hated it, but I didn't care where I was living as long as I was going to be happy.

It was the 7th of July, 1979, I remember it clearly. The man of my dreams was waiting to pick me up at the airport and I was embarking on the first day of the rest of my life.

His family were all happy to see me and made me feel welcome, but I knew it would take me a while to settle into my new home. I couldn't speak a word of English, was painfully shy being around all these new people and going from being the youngest in a big family to the eldest, seeing as I was married to their eldest son, would take some getting used to. But on the third day, the man I thought I had married disappeared forever.

My sister-in-law had made an aloo sabji and when my husband came back from work he just completely snapped. "You cooked this curry!" he started shouting at me. I didn't have a clue what he was on about. But he was still shouting. "My family use butter ghee when they cook curry and I can smell oil. You cooked this curry." I didn't cook the curry, my sister-in-law did, and anyway, what was all the fuss about? Then he hit me.



MESSAGE
Kiranjit says there is hope for women suffering abuse

> 'He grabbed me tightly by the arm and dragged me into our room. I was pinned down on the bed and he put his arms around my throat – I couldn't breathe. I thought I was going to die – and from that day onwards, I wish I had died'

I was shaking for the next few hours. I couldn't talk about it to anyone and I couldn't understand what I did wrong. I kept hoping he would come to my room and take me out for a walk, explain himself to me, make me feel better.

He apologised and, even though I was still unhappy, I chose to forgive and forget. The next day I decided I to befriend his family and I was bonding with his teenage sister, laughing, sharing jokes, going through photo albums, talking about our family lives. Suddenly, for no reason I can fathom, Deepak – who was in the other room – burst in and pushed his sister off her seat. He was shouting: "How dare you talk to her about our family business?"

The next thing I knew he grabbed me tightly by the arm and dragged me into our room. He pinned me down on the bed and put his arms around my throat. I couldn't breathe. I thought I was going to die. And from that day onwards, I wish I had died.

My brother, my dear, beloved brother, came to visit me and I had to meet him with a scarf around my neck to hide the bruises. I couldn't swallow, I was suffering so much inside – but I had to hide it. This is my destiny, I told myself. I am all alone and there is no one who can save me.

Fear

Apart from Deepak's younger brother, who was very good to me but chose not to interfere in family affairs, everyone else in the house became cold towards me. My mother-in-law wanted me to help her, Deepak – possessive as he was – wanted me all to himself.

They would stand there in the kitchen arguing over me, standing two feet apart with me between them, it was so terrifying. They would get so angry I would stand there quaking in fear, wondering which one would hit me first.

They both thought I was spoiled – they saw how much my family doted on me and they couldn't handle that. Deepak's family weren't the type to hug each other or be nice to each other. I think they found the affection I was accustomed to intimidating.

But I kept asking: "How am I spoiled? Do I ask for jewellery, money or expensive clothes? I ask for nothing."

Needless to say, his promise to let me work was never going to be honoured. As for the other condition, he would use the threat of forcing me to wear saris as mental torture, something he did when he got tired of the physical abuse.

My mother-in-law and Deepak's fighting over me got so bad that she threw us both out. We had to move in with his uncle and unlike before, when he used to apologise after every beating, now I was denied even that small bit of compassion at the end of all the pain.

I was completely helpless. One day I went to the local grocery store to buy some bread and bumped into one of his aunties. It was nice to talk to someone and I thought it would make for a good conversation between Deepak and me. Instead, I got a beating and a ban. I was forbidden to leave the house. I was a prisoner.

I spent all day terrified of the clock. He came home for lunch and finished work at six. And I never knew when, why or how much he would hurt me.

Crying

One day, just for a change, I put a new vegetable in one of his favourite curries. I just saw it in the fridge and thought it would go well with the curry. He came home for lunch and exploded. He started screaming: "Why did you lie to me? You think you're so clever?"

He then forced me to eat it while at the same time warning: "If you eat that, I'll break your jaw." So I'm standing there petrified with a handful of food close to my mouth. He's ordered me to eat it, but he says he'll break my jaw if I do. What am I supposed to do?

The final straw came when he denied me my family. He kept changing our home telephone number so my family would find it hard to contact me. I finally managed to contact my brother and he immediately sent us two plane tickets to fly back home. Deepak was so angry he smashed a hot cup of tea against my ankle, but he decided to make use of the tickets and go to India. Once we were there, Deepak started acting like the Deepak I'd first met. Everyone thought he was witty and handsome and kept telling me how lucky I was. I held off for three days, then I just burst out crying. I told my brother everything. He was horrified.

Deepak pleaded, begged and justified himself. "She's my wife and I can do whatever I want," was one in particular line that did not appeal to my brother, and he simply told him: "She's our sister and our daughter and it is our duty to protect her."

Deepak flew back alone. I was happy again, I was being myself for the first time in years. I was riding on my scooter, going to the cinema, catching up with old friends, it was such a beautiful time for me. Oh, the freedom.

But it fell apart the day my brother told me with a heavy heart: "Things have changed. Your father-in-law has died. It is only right that you are beside your husband at his funeral."

Affair

I knew then that I would not be coming back. After returning to Deepak for a brief while I almost fooled myself into thinking he was a changed man. His father had passed away, perhaps he had appreciated my true value while I was away, but no. After two weeks, things were back to how they were before.

> 'I poured petrol over his feet, thinking it would burn just his feet. Burn him so he could not chase me when I ran away. I wanted to give him some scars to remember me by, just like I'm covered with scars'

I had resigned myself to a lot, but I was adamant I was not going to have children with this man. At first, he didn't want a family either. I had an abortion with his blessing. He couldn't argue when I said a child would be financially unviable but, as time went on, he decided he wanted children after all. I had no choice in the matter.

We needed the money so I was allowed to go to work. My life for the next few years revolved around work, raising children and abuse – there was no time for anything else in between.

By now, doctors, police and solicitors were getting involved in our relationship, but Deepak would always come out of it looking innocent and I was left to suffer the consequences.

If there was any glimmer of hope in my heart that Deepak might one day stop being cruel and start loving me, it disappeared over a few days. It started with a phone bill for £150. I used to get £70 for working 40 hours a week and he expected me to pay for it. But I wasn't allowed to call anyone so why should I pay? And why was the bill so high in the first place?

Money

Then he became obsessed with money. He kept demanding money from my brothers and one day rang my sister-in-law in Canada and screamed: "Do you want to hear how I beat her?" and kept hitting me and hitting me with the receiver.

My brothers sent some money but that didn't change anything. I was working overtime while he was out flashing around in his brand new XR3 car. His demands went from £500 to £11,000 and my brothers couldn't justify paying out such a large sum. Why did he need so much money?

I looked through his Visa statement and there were bills for jewellery, restaurants and hotel rooms.

Why? I kept wondering. Why doesn't he just let me go? If he doesn't want me, if he wants to be with this other woman, why is he keeping me here?

After I confronted him with his affair, he beat me so badly I had to run away because I thought if I stayed he would kill me. But he found me on my way to work and drove me to his mother's house – a place reserved for the fiercest beatings to show his mother what a man he is.

It was in the car that I defended myself for the first time during our marriage. I bit his ear and threatened not to let go unless he drove me to a police station. He promised on his dead father's memory that he would, but the moment I let go he held a screwdriver to my eyes threatening to rip them out.

Prison

I was an empty shell. Nothing mattered anymore. All feelings of helplessness were overtaken by anger. I decided to give him one last chance. "Can we talk?" I asked him. "Can't we just sit down and talk for once?" He responded by sticking a hot iron against my eye. This was all our marriage was about – inflicting pain and receiving it.

So I decided he should be on the other end of it for a change. To see what it feels like. I poured petrol over his feet, thinking it would burn just his feet. Burn him so he could not chase me when I ran away. I wanted to give him some scars to remember me by, just like I'm covered with scars.

I didn't realise how big the fire would be and I certainly didn't think it would be so bad that it would kill him a few days later. But it did. And while I regret that I had to take a man's life, I do not regret the fact that he is dead.

I have been to prison. And for all that loss of freedom and hardship, I would have happily exchanged an eternity behind bars to escape Deepak's torture...'

• Kiranjit's autobiography, Circle of Light, is published by Harper Collins and available at all good book shops for £9.99.